

## The Authority to Serve II Corinthians 6:1-10

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The word for the week, judging by the propers for Invocavit, is the word "ministry"—which, as we have heard so often and so appropriately, does not mean "clergy" but does mean "service." Ministry. There it was already in the Invocavit Gospel, in our Lord's striving with the tempter in the wilderness. "Ministry" looms into the picture there not just at the end when the angels come and "minister" to Jesus with nourishment, but throughout the story: he is the minister, the servant, the suffering servant, the *ebed Jahweh*, in face of every temptation to be some other kind of Son of God than the Servant-Son. Hadn't he just previous to this heard the voice at the Jordan, "This is my beloved Son"? Well, then, "if you are the Son of God," what are you doing out here in the wilderness starving, without the kingdoms of the world at your feet, without the temple worship celebrating your presence? But he had it on the highest authority, on the Word of His Father, that he is the Son— this way, this way of the servant. Still, even that is lowly service: to have to take one's sonship simply on your Father's Word for it, all appearances to the contrary. But aren't we glad he did—we whom he came to minister unto," we who now are sons like him pressed into his Majesty's service: to wash the world's feet and wipe its nose and bind its wounds. And not only the world's but, what is a bit more difficult, one another's, I yours and you mine. True, "ministry" may not mean clergy, but clergy does mean "ministry." In the Anglican communion a special collect is prayed on Invocavit for those who are candidates for ordination. And who needs the collect more than we?

However, this sermon is not on the Invocavit Gospel but on the Invocavit epistle lesson, II Corinthians 6:1-10. But that lesson reads best when you back up for a running start into the last three verses of the preceding chapter. They give the clue to what the "ministry" is really for. Paul writes:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us  
to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;  
that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to  
himself, not counting their trespasses against them,  
and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.  
So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal  
through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled  
to God. For our sake he made him to be sin  
who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the  
righteousness of God.

Now the Epistle lesson.

Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says,

"At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation."

Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold now is the day of salvation. We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. (As the NEB puts it: "penniless, we own the world.")

The young theologian said, now that he is a father and helps put away the children's toys at bedtime, he can understand St. Paul's statement, "When I became a man I put away childish things." If that was not exactly what St. Paul had in mind, what did he mean? . Paul meant that, of all the childish things among the Corinthians, the worst was their grandiose, hero-worshipping, Superman misconception of the authority of the ministry. And (let us say it again) when Paul mentions the Church's "ministry," he does not mean only the Church's clergy. He means the Church's service, the sort of service every member of the Church is called to perform. But that was exactly the one thing about the Church's authority which the Corinthians so childishly misunderstood. It was hard for them to believe that the Church could command authority simply by being the world's servant. Now the Corinthian attitude may be all right for children—say, for little boys who sit in front of a TV. For them a Superman or a Man From U.N.C.L.E. or T.H.E. Cat would lose authority if they were suddenly to see him at home in his kitchen, his wife's apron tied around him, helping her with the dishes. That reaction is appropriate to little boys, but not to grown-up ones. The trouble is, and not only in Corinth, that there are adult Christians who are just that childish. What childish Christians cannot understand is that the Church has the authority of Jesus Christ only when, like Jesus Christ, she comes to wash the world's feet, not to be ministered unto but to minister.

Unhappily, this childish, high-falutin notion of the Church's authority attracts many folks into the professional service of the Church for very unservant-like reasons. And it's no wonder. Aside from the movies, where else can you display the sort of exhibitionism

which Paul calls "eloquence" the way you can display it in the Church's pulpits and chancels or in her classrooms or in her dormitory bull-sessions (than which no "concern" could be more "ultimate" or more authoritative.) Where else but in the Church can you boast about your statistical growth, your capital gains, your promotional successes, your headlines and your prime time and your Nielson rating and your fan mail, your pure doctrine and your polemical triumphs, without seeming to be boasting at all so long as you rationalize your boasting "for the sake of the Kingdom?" Where else can you, as Paul says, "lord it over" people the way you can when, in a pastoral counseling session or in an elder's meeting or in a Sunday School class, you are entrusted with their eternal destinies? When you have financed a missionary to New Guinea or patched up somebody's marriage or discovered some new private insight into the gospel or lifted some poor soul out of despair, is there anything which can more quickly exalt you with a sense of your own worthwhileness? No wonder the plumber in my hometown used to regret every Sunday morning that he had not taken his mother's advice and gone into (as we used to say) the ministry. Perhaps there is only one thing more self-exalting than these experiences and that is the joy of criticizing them, as I have just now so childishly done--the sense of discovery and prophetic courage one feels when he criticizes the Church for not being as serviceable as she should be. Where else can men play God and feel so right about it as when they criticize the Church for being weak, torn by strife, uninfluential, in debt, dead? Having delivered themselves of their criticisms, they then feel authorized to withdraw from the Church's service. For who would want to involve himself in such a losing operation—who except a hypocrite or a masochist.

One way or another we refuse to let our authority as Christians depend simply on our being constructive, charitable, patient servants. And if we are repelled by a divine authority which comes in the weak and unimpressive form of a servant-Church, then we are apt to be repelled also by a divine authority which comes in a stable, in the lap of a young virgin, speaking a Galilean hillbilly accent, riding a donkey, perishing on a cross. This, to put it plainly, is what Paul means by "accepting the grace of God in vain."

On the other hand, that we the Church are weak, is not the real wonder. What is a wonder is that, despite our weakness, we have the authority we do have. And what is that? The authority, as the spokesmen for Jesus Christ, to cooperate with Him in reconciling the world to God. "He has entrusted to us the service of reconciliation. . . Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us; so we entreat you on behalf of Christ, "Be reconciled to God." Would you believe that! There, my brothers, is the place to be like children. If wonder is the special talent of children, then here is the place to be, not childish, but childlike. Here is something to wonder at. "Ambassadors for Christ," indeed. Who, we? Yes, we.

That we in our weakness should be authorized for such exalted service as the reconciling of the world, that is already wonder enough. What is more wondrous still is that in our serving to reconcile the world on behalf of Christ, our very weakness itself becomes a means to that end, becomes a resource. Our weakness becomes an instrument to be pressed into service precisely for reconciling the world. Paul himself was a case in point. He admits he was not much of a speaker. He may have been physically stunted and

unattractive. He was in and out of jail, certainly no fair-haired favorite of his church's public relations department. He succeeded regularly in alienating people, sometimes very important people. Listen to his credentials. He sounds like an all-time loser: ". . . Afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; . . . in dishonor, in ill repute; . . . treated as impostors, . . . as unknown, . . . as dying, . . . as punished, . . . as sorrowful, . . . as poor, . . . as having nothing." This would hardly put him at the top of any "call" list.

Still, to say only this much is ridiculous and misleading. Paul's greatest weakness was the gospel. Apart from whatever limitations Paul may have had personally, his greatest liability by far—the one liability which dramatized all the other—was the gospel which he preached. It was the Gospel for the preaching of which he was flogged, jailed, cursed, and finally martyred. Yet he himself appeals to these weaknesses and especially to that weakness, as the very opportunities through which Jesus Christ makes His reconciling appeal to the world.

It would be downright foolish to suppose that either Paul or the Church means to place a premium on weakness for its own sake, as though there were some intrinsic virtue in being unattractive or tongue-tied or offensive or incompetent or put to death. These things, by themselves, are unmitigated inconveniences.

The only way the Christian servant's weaknesses can have any virtue—literally, any power—is for his weaknesses to be trumped, to be outshone by the inner power the servant has, not from himself, but from the Holy Spirit. To be afflicted, flogged, overworked, to have to go without enough food and sleep—all this, by itself, is nothing. To endure all this with patience, with kindness, with good humor, without self-pity, without losing heart, with love unfeigned, with the power of God, with righteousness—that is something. :

And that strength in weakness has the power to reconcile the world to God. In other words, Christians work to surmount their weaknesses with God's strength, to reciprocate resentment with charity, to keep themselves blameless in the face of blame, not in order that they might rack up personal triumphs for themselves, not in order that they might heap coals of fire on their enemies' heads, but in order that they might thus be charades of Jesus Christ, imaging His own terrible meekness and His tireless winsome compassion, acting out in their lives the paradox of Good Friday and Easter, of weakness and omnipotence, in order to seduce men back into the love of God.

And that, my brothers, is what they are doing, all around you, among you. Even I, with even this sermon—if you will divine the strength through its weakness—is doing that. Isn't it great? Isn't He?

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